

the quantitative body of the nation that speaks it (though it is determined by that, too), as by the quality of the poem written in it. It will suffice to recall the authors of Greek or Roman antiquity; it will suffice to recall Dante. And that which is being created today in Russian or English, for example, guarantees the existence of these languages over the course of the next millennium also. The poet, I wish to repeat, is language's means for existence—or, as my beloved Auden said, he is the one by whom it lives. I who write these lines will cease to be; so will you who read them. But the language in which they are written and in which you read them will remain, not merely because language is a more lasting thing than man, but because it is more capable of mutation.

One who writes a poem, however, writes it not because he courts fame with posterity, although often he hopes that a poem will outlive him, at least briefly. One who writes a poem writes it because the language prompts, or simply dictates, the next line. Beginning a poem, the poet as a rule doesn't know the way it is going to come out; and at times he is very surprised by the way it turns out, since often it turns out better than he expected, often his thought carries further than he reckoned. And that is the moment when the future of language invades its present.

There are, as we know, three modes of cognition: analytical, intuitive, and the mode that was known to the biblical prophets, revelation. What distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature is that it uses all three of them at once (gravitating primarily toward the second and the third). For all three of them are given in the language; and there are times when, by means of a single word, a single rhyme, the writer of a poem manages to find himself where no one has ever been before him, further, perhaps, than he himself would have wished for. The one who writes a poem writes it above all because verse writing is an extraordinary accelerator of consciousness, of thinking, of comprehending the universe. Having experienced this acceleration once, one is no longer capable of abandoning the chance to repeat this experience; one falls into dependency on this process, the way others fall into dependency on drugs or alcohol. One who finds himself in this sort of dependency on language is, I guess, what they call a poet.

(Translated by Barry Rubin. Copyright © 1987 by The Nobel Foundation.)

THE EMPIRE STRIKES OUT

Mortal Splendor: The American Empire in Transition by Walter Russell Mead

(Houghton Mifflin, 381 pp., \$19.95, \$9.95 paper)

One of the anomalies of the American Empire, as future historians will no doubt note with curiosity, is that the American people were hardly aware of its existence before they had to cope with the consequences of its demise. That we possess an empire—wealthier and more extensive than any hitherto known—is so taken for granted by the rest of the world as hardly to merit comment. We alone seem to find the notion surprising.

It is not evil to be an imperial power. Most of the illustrious states of history were, including Athens. But it serves little purpose to be one and insist that one is not. While it is true that one can, like Molière's prose-speaker, engage in an action all one's life and not know the proper term for it, the costs and effects of empire are no less real for being unexamined. *But it is an even sadder thing to be an American.*

Instead of viewing the American Empire as a term of opprobrium, let us simply consider it a description of what has been, on balance, a phenomenally successful institution. It began in earnest after the Spanish-American War of 1898, when we consolidated our hold over the Caribbean and, with the acquisition of the Philippines, extended our reach to Asia. But it did not become truly global until 1945, following the war that was a debacle for the other industrialized nations but a boon for us. We brought into our nest the colonies that declining empires such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands could no longer afford. Our factories and fields, unscarred by bombs, produced half the world's goods. The (then) almighty dollar became the world's reserve currency. This made New York the world's financial capital, and also allowed us to cover our deficits by printing money that others, for a time, considered as "good as gold."

Our richer protectorates in Europe, and Japan, having chosen the pursuit of wealth over glory, even over self-defense, allowed us to run their foreign policy. They also bought, and continue to buy, our Treasury IOUs, thus allowing us to import more of their goods than our labors would otherwise permit.

The people of what we now call the Third World hewed our wood and drew our water, and the Soviets confined themselves mostly to their mini-empire in Eastern Europe. Being immensely rich and self-confident, we thought we could do just about anything if we willed it hard enough.

But in the early 1970s things started to go wrong. First there was Vietnam, which demonstrated—as Suez and Kenya had for the British, and Indochina and Algeria for the French—that there was a limit to what the home front was willing to pay for the empire. The Vietnam War was lost not because of the media or the anti-war movement (the former was more timid and the latter less effective than the rewriters of history would have us believe), but because the American people had had enough. That is usually the way empires are lost.

Then came OPEC, which showed that the Third World, or at least the part of it that industrialized nations cannot do without, had a whip of its own. Our empire has not been the same since. The Reagan military buildup, with its wistful attempt to buy respect through high-cost high tech, weakened our economy without intimidating those yapping at our heels. Witness our proud half-trillion-dollar new fleet paralyzed in the Persian Gulf by a handful of Chinese missiles and World War II vintage mines. Even worse, we have paid for this shiny, but for the most part unusable, hardware by selling off pieces of America to European and Japanese investors.

American Empire: the term now has an almost nostalgic ring. Like the Wild West, one can imagine it as an attraction at some future theme park. The real empire, the one that made friend and foe stand up and salute, is slowly passing into memory. It is a victim both of historical change (the rest of the world has recovered from the war) and of an economy that can no longer sustain the burden. Though a long way from being out, we are now an imperial power in decline. This might be a cause for alarm if the empire continued to produce riches in which we all basked, however undeser-

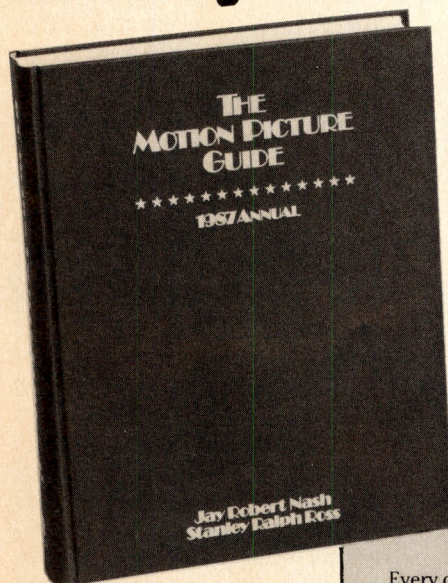
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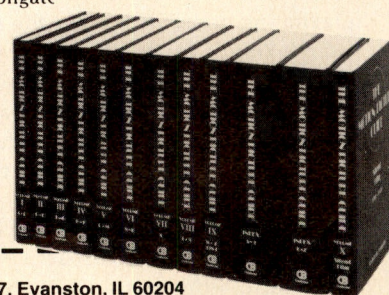
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vedly. But the truth is that empire is an expensive business. There are easier ways to make money. Ask the Japanese or the Germans. The problem with empires is that they are acquired in a frenzy of adolescent exuberance, milked for a time in a soft glow of smug self-satisfaction (the French had their *mission civilisatrice*, the British their "rule of law," and we our global "responsibilities"), and then paid for, like many of the fruits of adolescent exuberance, with sweat and treasure.

Yes, our entrepreneurs find cheap labor in such places as Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Taiwan: busy hands to sew baseballs and assemble computer chips. But *cui bono*? Not the American worker, who sees his job exported "offshore" in the name of economic efficiency. Not the American economy, which is learning too late that it has to fight not only for foreign markets, but also for domestic ones. And not the average American, who is instructed, for example, to pay several billion dollars to provide an escort service that will allow Kuwaiti oil to flow without impediment to Japanese factories. The trouble with empire, as our rich allies learned long ago, is that it ceases to be profitable at about the time that it starts to seem comfortable.

MUCH IS being written these days about the problems of empire, whether in defense (the "anguish of power") or in sorrow (why don't our rich allies shape up?). Most of these works tend to take the empire as a good thing for the world as well as for us. Now, into this mire of postimperial nostalgia steps a fire-breathing critic, himself a child of the empire. Walter Russell Mead, who was still in college during our last imperial adventure in Indochina, sees the empire as the fount of our own troubles as well as many of the world's evils. Like most leftist critics, he deplores the way we prop up tinhorn dictators, exploit the planet's downtrodden masses, and provide a healthy climate for mass injustice.

But unlike most critics on the left, he is not content merely with excoriating the empire—in the hope either that we will be shamed into mending our ways or threatened into changing them by the global proletariat. Rather he uses the empire as a point of departure to examine the effect that imperial diplomacy has had on the kind of society that America has become. Thus this is a book not so much about the American empire, despite its title, as about imperial Ameri-

ca. Empire, like almost everything else, has its price. What has ours cost? Who benefits? Who suffers? The quest leads Mead—with his taste for historical analogy and his talent for making economics seem almost a human science—down provocative byways.

Mortal Splendor, with its deliberately Gibbonesque title and theme, is in part about the decline of the empire over which we ruled proudly, if briefly. Even more it is an examination of our society and our very psyche. Into this study the author seems to have thrown virtually everything he has thought about American history, not to mention psychology and literature. The result is an inquiry of considerable originality and daring that cuts across the usual categories. For him empire is both a condition and a metaphor, and the way in which he plays one against the other is what gives this book its special strength. With its trenchant wit and elegance of phrase, this is a most unusual work of political analysis: sometimes exasperating, usually irreverent, and almost continually thought-provoking.

LIKE A GOOD neo-Marxist, Mead sees the empire as an exercise in exploitation. Its structure is of three tiers. In the first he puts the rich, industrialized countries of northern Europe, the old British dominions, and Japan: all liberal democracies with various degrees of cushions for the poor to alleviate the inequities of the market. These nations sometimes complain about American bossiness, but they are "too deeply committed to the privileges of empire to take serious steps against the imperial order." In the second tier he places the also-rans: states like Argentina and Greece, those on the verge of breakthrough into the first rank but never quite making it. Finally, at the bottom of the heap lie the impoverished low-wage, bad-health, dim-future states we lump together under the rubric of the Third World. These are the countries to which we send International Monetary Fund bill collectors for our banks, but also arm with military hardware to fight the wars that define the periphery of empire.

Despite periodic imprecations to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Mead maintains, these countries are unlikely to escape from poverty. Not because their people are lazy or without skills, but because they are victims of blocked development: blocked by the global economic system that makes them poor, blocked by their own foreign-backed oligarchies that keep them that way. It is the Third World



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proletariat that makes possible the high standard of living of the industrialized countries. "The same forces that create prosperity and freedom here," he charges, "create misery and slavery there."

To the perennial question of why it is that the United States always seems to keep itself busy suppressing other people's revolutions, he has an answer. Not because Moscow will somehow gain a stranglehold on us if some miserable banana republic should throw out the comprador landlords and their uniformed goons, but because the job of American policy-makers is to maintain and expand an exploitative economic system. "The third-tier state is as often as not an entity created by the empire, with an economy dominated by the empire, and with a government whose politics, form, and personnel are chosen by and for the empire," he writes.

TRUE, all this is familiar, if stylishly presented: it is the vocabulary of neo-Marxist dependency theory. Mead's vision, too, is familiar—that of the subjugated masses of the Third World locked into an unjust order and finally breaking their chains through revolution. Of course, familiarity does not make this argument wrong; but there is something incomplete, and therefore misleading, about it. First, there is the problem that the third-tier country is becoming increasingly, perhaps tragically, irrelevant to the needs of the first-tier countries. Unless such countries have a scarce or exploitable natural resource, such as oil, they are more often a burden than a source of profit. There is more money to be made these days in computer chips than in cheap bananas. Chile is a vicious dictatorship today not because the United States needs cheap copper, but for a far more abstract reason: because American statesmen wanted to prevent the Soviets from having the supposed "advantage" of a Marxist government there. It was not economics but ideology, and great power gamesmanship, that induced Nixon and Kissinger to topple the elected president and bring in a friendly military dictatorship. Similarly Reagan has been conducting a proxy war in Nicaragua not to wring more sweat from the brows of peasants, but in the name of a "sphere of influence."

Now it is doubtless true that in many parts of what passes for our empire we find the conditions Mead describes: "a tiny elite linked to foreign interests; a

small middle class unable to mediate the conflict; peaceful means for change are blocked—but existing conditions are intolerable." The Philippines come readily to mind, and it is difficult to see anything at the end of that road other than a protracted and increasingly bloody civil war followed by a Marxisant dictatorship. Whether that will ameliorate the life of the masses remains to be seen, although it is hard to see how their life could be much worse than it is at present.

But there is also the case of Brazil, for example, where the exploitation of the peasantry and proletariat comes straight from the heart of darkness. Is it really adequate, or even helpful, to describe such a country any longer as an American colony? The horrors perpetrated there are not inflicted by overseers doing the work of their Yankee masters—as one might, for example, say about a plantation like Guatemala. Brazilian exploiters are home grown, and they are increasingly eager to put the once-proud Northern imperialists in their place. With their protectionist walls they shut out our exports, and then they take away, with their low-wage industries, our overseas markets in such fields as aviation and automobiles. To imply that such a country is being diddled by Washington, however true it may have been in the past, really does not get us very far today.

Neither, for that matter, do the three tiers. Is there not also a fourth tier—what economists call the NICs, the newly industrializing countries? In theory these countries, for example South Korea and Singapore, should be miserably poor and prone to revolution, as not so many years ago they were. But now they are nudging the second tier also-rans, and already they are giving first-tier nations (ours, for example) a run for their money. A theory of imperialism that fails to take these factors into account—that overlooks the whole phenomenon of that new cliché, the Pacific Rim—is more hortatory than descriptive.

IF MEAD IS a bit romantic about the Third World, however, he is coldly analytical in examining the effect of empire on the American republic. Here lies the book's greatest strength, and what makes it worthy of special attention. He is clever and intellectually penetrating on the various hypocrisies of liberalism and conservatism, fundamentalism and the worship of the marketplace, the imperial itch, the anesthetic platitudes of

our civic life, and the corruption of Republicanism into Caesarism. Like many radicals, he is as contemptuous of American liberalism, with its fetish of the marketplace and its shabby compromises with the need for social justice, as he is of conservatism. "A refusal to believe in real, irreconcilable class conflict is close to the essence of liberalism," he notes dismissively.

This does not mean, however, that he considers conservatism to be any better equipped to deal with the dilemma of an empire in decline. He sees American conservatives caught between the fundamentalist social wing of anti-abortionists, thought-controllers, and Bible-thumpers on one side, and simplistic market worshippers on the other. But the market, as he observes, is a radical, not a conservative, god, one that erodes traditional social institutions as it buries inefficient producers. The unacknowledged paradox of the right is that "conservative economics overthrows conservative order."

WHAT SOME CALL the Free World and what Mead calls the cold war empire is declining, in his analysis, not from lack of will, but from the inability of the economy to sustain it, and from the forces of opposition that it generates. While Third World insurrections are likely to spread—more Nicaraguas and Irans—declining domestic productivity, the loss of foreign markets, and mounting domestic demands for limited resources can only reduce the ability to intervene abroad. Sustained military intervention would weaken us politically and economically. Wall Street collapsed, after all, the same week that American ships blasted Iranian oil platforms in the Persian Gulf. Though the United States possesses awesome military power, the use of that power shakes the economic temple.

Ultimately, Mead argues, it will be economics, rather than the Soviets, that will make it impossible to sustain the remarkably successful but now deteriorating American empire. The steady shift of investment from high-wage to low-wage countries reduces demand on a global scale. This causes chronic overproduction, mounting unemployment, deterioration of the banking system, and political instability in the First World. There are signs that such conditions are emerging. Mead has his own solution to this crisis: increasing real wages in the Third World. And he concludes: "Only the active support of the powerful democratic

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forces in the advanced countries can resolve the impasse in the Third World; only a resolution of the Third World's political problems can protect the social compromise in the advanced countries." Thus by doing good, the rich countries will also do well and save themselves.

IF THIS historic compromise is not made, we can expect, he predicts, to be affected by the same class conflict endemic to the Third World. The economic surpluses that made it possible to satisfy the middle class and large portions of the working class will steadily diminish. The result will be a struggle to determine how society's resources shall be divided. "When politics visibly revolves around class, then theories of politics that begin with class look plausible." As unemployment and low wages seep from the Third World into the First, Mead foresees a resumption of social conflict that will present American democracy with one of its most serious challenges, as an embattled right, threatened by a revived populism on the left, flirts with authoritarianism.

Even if this scenario may seem far-fetched, Mead may not be amiss in arguing that the age of consensus politics, with liberals essentially indistinguishable from conservatives except on the far fringes, may be coming to an end. To him, this offers an opportunity to Democrats, if they turn from their neoliberal fantasies of techno-utopias and their indifference to the working class and recall that they have been successful at the polls only when they have been able to "synthesize the moral and economic yearnings of the people into a line of pragmatic policy."

What Mead taketh away with one hand he giveth with the other. Although class warfare may lie around the corner, as unemployment mounts and markets shrink, so too lies opportunity in the form of a postimperial America that will allow its own exploited under- and working classes not only to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, but to take the lead in creating a more equitable world.

Mead's approach may strike some as too '60s-ish, even though it is written in the mood and vocabulary of the '80s. His Savonarola-like judgments on the evils of American imperialism may seem not only *déjà vu*, but *vieux jeu*—a nostalgic look at the old days when the United States actually did, or at least seemed to, run the world. Others will see in his analysis an accurate description of the mentality evidenced in the Iran-*contra*

hearings. To my mind, his attack on empire is both justified and a bit outdated. Our various presidents and imperial administrators have inflicted suffering on innocent people in the name of noble causes. On the other hand, the notion that it was not only our right but our duty to run the world as we saw proper has evaporated with the trade surplus. Washington no longer defines the world, but is being defined by it. The arrogance may be undiminished, but the power is fast slipping.

Even if one cannot quite share Mead's indignation about the evils of our empire, his intensity of feeling gives this book a special thrust. His alternatives may strike some as too utopian or pessimistic; his economic "dependency" the-

ories too mechanistic; and his whole approach suspiciously literary. Yet these are the qualities that raise his work far above the predictability and the dreariness of most studies of political economy. One must be impressed by the range of his knowledge, the maturity of his understanding, and the passion of his conviction. The value of this book is not its lament about the inequities of the American empire, but in its understanding of the forces that empire has unleashed, and of the inescapable dilemmas its success has created. A study of culture and history as well as of economics, *Mortal Splendor* is that rarest of things, a work of political imagination.

RONALD STEEL

DOWN BY LAW

A Guide to Critical Legal Studies by Mark Kelman

(Harvard University Press, 365 pp., \$30)

One of the few remaining strongholds of the New Left has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be legal academia. Talk of social revolution thunders out of Harvard Law School, and radicals stalk the halls of Stanford and the University of Wisconsin. The Critical Legal Studies movement, or CLS, has given American legal education its liveliest moments of the last decade. The best stories come from Harvard: a CLS proposal that Harvard's janitors be paid as much as the law professors; student demonstrations and protests reminiscent of the '60s; a spectacular tenure fight, culminating in one professor's three-day sit-in in his own office. Despite recent setbacks at Harvard (one "crit" was denied tenure and president Derek Bok vetoed an offer to another), the crits have clearly become a major force in legal education.

For all the furor, however, the intellectual import of CLS has remained obscure. Finding a synthesis of CLS thought is no easy task, and Mark Kelman's book is an admirable attempt to remedy that lack. He offers an impressive survey of the major CLS writers and their relationship to other schools of legal thought. Although he considers himself a crit, he differs sharply from much

that his colleagues have written: he might have called his book "A Critical Guide to Critical Legal Studies." Again and again, he strips away hyperbolic rhetoric or fallacious reasoning and exposes what he considers the heart of the CLS position. The problem is that after Kelman's incisive criticism, we are left with an intriguing intellectual edifice, but one that seems to have lost much of its political significance.

Most of Kelman's efforts, like those of the CLS movement generally, have been aimed at attacking "liberal" theory. The intent has been to show that liberal thought is shot-through with inescapable philosophical contradictions, which render it ultimately incoherent. Rather than confronting these philosophical dilemmas, Kelman says, the legal system attempts to "paper over them." There is a curiously academic air to this criticism: "philosophical incoherence" is presented as the ultimate indictment of a social system. Unless society is going to stop in its tracks until philosophers produce definitive answers, however, society had better "paper over" these dilemmas. Exposing the way societies do this is interesting, but it is hardly a devastating social criticism.

the quantitative body of the nation that speaks it (though it is determined by that, too), as by the quality of the poem written in it. It will suffice to recall the authors of Greek or Roman antiquity; it will suffice to recall Dante. And that which is being created today in Russian or English, for example, guarantees the existence of these languages over the course of the next millennium also. The poet, I wish to repeat, is language's means for existence—or, as my beloved Auden said, he is the one by whom it lives. I who write these lines will cease to be; so will you who read them. But the language in which they are written and in which you read them will remain, not merely because language is a more lasting thing than man, but because it is more capable of mutation.

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Mortal Splendor: The American Empire in Transition by Walter Russell Mead

(Houghton Mifflin, 381 pp., \$19.95, \$9.95 paper)

See below, quoted in Z-Z, p. 63

One of the anomalies of the American Empire, as future historians will no doubt note with curiosity, is that the American people were hardly aware of its existence before they had to cope with the consequences of its demise. That we possess an empire—wealthier and more extensive than any hitherto known—is so taken for granted by the rest of the world as hardly to merit comment. We alone seem to find the notion surprising.

It is not evil to be an imperial power. Most of the illustrious states of history were, including Athens. But it serves little purpose to be one and insist that one is not. While it is true that one can, like Molière's prose-speaker, engage in an action all one's life and not know the proper term for it, the costs and effects of empire are no less real for being unexamined. *But he is not exempt.*

Instead of viewing the American Empire as a term of opprobrium, let us simply consider it a description of what has been, on balance, a phenomenally successful institution. It began in earnest after the Spanish-American War of 1898, when we consolidated our hold over the Caribbean and, with the acquisition of the Philippines, extended our reach to Asia. But it did not become truly global until 1945, following the war that was a debacle for the other industrialized nations but a boon for us. We brought into our nest the colonies that declining empires such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands could no longer afford. Our factories and fields, unscarred by bombs, produced half the world's goods. The (then) almighty dollar became the world's reserve currency. This made New York the world's financial capital, and also allowed us to cover our deficits by printing money that others, for a time, considered as "good as gold."

Our richer protectorates in Europe, and Japan, having chosen the pursuit of wealth over glory, even over self-defense, allowed us to run their foreign policy. They also bought, and continue to buy, our Treasury IOUs, thus allowing us to import more of their goods than our labors would otherwise permit.

The people of what we now call the Third World hewed our wood and drew our water, and the Soviets confined themselves mostly to their mini-empire in Eastern Europe. Being immensely rich and self-confident, we thought we could do just about anything if we willed it hard enough.

But in the early 1970s things started to go wrong. First there was Vietnam, which demonstrated—as Suez and Kenya had for the British, and Indochina and Algeria for the French—that there was a limit to what the home front was willing to pay for the empire. The Vietnam War was lost not because of the media or the anti-war movement (the former was more timid and the latter less effective than the rewriters of history would have us believe), but because the American people had had enough. That is usually the way empires are lost.

Then came OPEC, which showed that the Third World, or at least the part of it that industrialized nations cannot do without, had a whip of its own. Our empire has not been the same since. The Reagan military buildup, with its wistful attempt to buy respect through high-cost high tech, weakened our economy without intimidating those yapping at our heels. Witness our proud half-trillion-dollar new fleet paralyzed in the Persian Gulf by a handful of Chinese missiles and World War II vintage mines. Even worse, we have paid for this shiny, but for the most part unusable, hardware by selling off pieces of America to European and Japanese investors.

American Empire: the term now has an almost nostalgic ring. Like the Wild West, one can imagine it as an attraction at some future theme park. The real empire, the one that made friend and foe stand up and salute, is slowly passing into memory. It is a victim both of historical change (the rest of the world has recovered from the war) and of an economy that can no longer sustain the burden. Though a long way from being out, we are now an imperial power in decline. This might be a cause for alarm if the empire continued to produce riches in which we all basked, however undeser-

vedly. But the truth is that empire is an expensive business. There are easier ways to make money. Ask the Japanese or the Germans. The problem with empires is that they are acquired in a frenzy of adolescent exuberance, milked for a time in a soft glow of smug self-satisfaction (the French had their *mission civilisatrice*, the British their "rule of law," and we our global "responsibilities"), and then paid for, like many of the fruits of adolescent exuberance, with sweat and treasure.

Yes, our entrepreneurs find cheap labor in such places as Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Taiwan: busy hands to sew baseballs and assemble computer chips. But *cui bono*? Not the American worker, who sees his job exported "offshore" in the name of economic efficiency. Not the American economy, which is learning too late that it has to fight not only for foreign markets, but also for domestic ones. And not the average American, who is instructed, for example, to pay several billion dollars to provide an escort service that will allow Kuwaiti oil to flow without impediment to Japanese factories. The trouble with empire, as our rich allies learned long ago, is that it ceases to be profitable at about the time that it starts to seem comfortable.

MUCH IS being written these days about the problems of empire, whether in defense (the "anguish of power") or in sorrow (why don't our rich allies shape up?). Most of these works tend to take the empire as a good thing for the world as well as for us. Now, into this mire of postimperial nostalgia steps a fire-breathing critic, himself a child of the empire. Walter Russell Mead, who was still in college during our last imperial adventure in Indochina, sees the empire as the fount of our own troubles as well as many of the world's evils. Like most leftist critics, he deplores the way we prop up tinhorn dictators, exploit the planet's downtrodden masses, and provide a healthy climate for mass injustice.

But unlike most critics on the left, he is not content merely with excoriating the empire—in the hope either that we will be shamed into mending our ways or threatened into changing them by the global proletariat. Rather he uses the empire as a point of departure to examine the effect that imperial diplomacy has had on the kind of society that America has become. Thus this is a book not so much about the American empire, despite its title, as about imperial Ameri-

ca. Empire, like almost everything else, has its price. What has ours cost? Who benefits? Who suffers? The quest leads Mead—with his taste for historical analogy and his talent for making economics seem almost a human science—down provocative byways.

Mortal Splendor, with its deliberately Gibbonesque title and theme, is in part about the decline of the empire over which we ruled proudly, if briefly. Even more it is an examination of our society and our very psyche. Into this study the author seems to have thrown virtually everything he has thought about American history, not to mention psychology and literature. The result is an inquiry of considerable originality and daring that cuts across the usual categories. For him empire is both a condition and a metaphor, and the way in which he plays one against the other is what gives this book its special strength. With its trenchant wit and elegance of phrase, this is a most unusual work of political analysis: sometimes exasperating, usually irreverent, and almost continually thought-provoking.

LIKE A GOOD neo-Marxist, Mead sees the empire as an exercise in exploitation. Its structure is of three tiers. In the first he puts the rich, industrialized countries of northern Europe, the old British dominions, and Japan: all liberal democracies with various degrees of cushions for the poor to alleviate the inequities of the market. These nations sometimes complain about American bossiness, but they are "too deeply committed to the privileges of empire to take serious steps against the imperial order." In the second tier he places the also-rans: states like Argentina and Greece, those on the verge of breakthrough into the first rank but never quite making it. Finally, at the bottom of the heap lie the impoverished low-wage, bad-health, dim-future states we lump together under the rubric of the Third World. These are the countries to which we send International Monetary Fund bill collectors for our banks, but also arm with military hardware to fight the wars that define the periphery of empire.

Despite periodic imprecations to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Mead maintains, these countries are unlikely to escape from poverty. Not because their people are lazy or without skills, but because they are victims of blocked development; blocked by the global economic system that makes them poor, blocked by their own foreign-backed oligarchies that keep them that way. It is the Third World,



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proletariat that makes possible the high standard of living of the industrialized countries. "The same forces that create prosperity and freedom here," he charges, "create misery and slavery there."

To the perennial question of why it is that the United States always seems to keep itself busy suppressing other people's revolutions, he has an answer. Not because Moscow will somehow gain a stranglehold on us if some miserable banana republic should throw out the comprador landlords and their uniformed goons, but because the job of American policy-makers is to maintain and expand an exploitative economic system. "The third-tier state is as often as not an entity created by the empire, with an economy dominated by the empire, and with a government whose politics, form, and personnel are chosen by and for the empire," he writes.

TRUE, all this is familiar, if stylishly presented: it is the vocabulary of neo-Marxist dependency theory. Mead's vision, too, is familiar—that of the subjugated masses of the Third World locked into an unjust order and finally breaking their chains through revolution. Of course, familiarity does not make this argument wrong; but there is something incomplete, and therefore misleading, about it. First, there is the problem that the third-tier country is becoming increasingly, perhaps tragically, irrelevant to the needs of the first-tier countries. Unless such countries have a scarce or exploitable natural resource, such as oil, they are more often a burden than a source of profit. There is more money to be made these days in computer chips than in cheap bananas. Chile is a vicious dictatorship today not because the United States needs cheap copper, but for a far more abstract reason: because American statesmen wanted to prevent the Soviets from having the supposed "advantage" of a Marxist government there. It was not economics but ideology, and great power gamesmanship, that induced Nixon and Kissinger to topple the elected president and bring in a friendly military dictatorship. Similarly Reagan has been conducting a proxy war in Nicaragua not to wring more sweat from the brows of peasants, but in the name of a "sphere of influence."

Now it is doubtless true that in many parts of what passes for our empire we find the conditions Mead describes: "a tiny elite linked to foreign interests; a

small middle class unable to mediate the conflict; peaceful means for change are blocked—but existing conditions are intolerable." The Philippines come readily to mind, and it is difficult to see anything at the end of that road other than a protracted and increasingly bloody civil war followed by a Marxisant dictatorship. Whether that will ameliorate the life of the masses remains to be seen, although it is hard to see how their life could be much worse than it is at present.

But there is also the case of Brazil, for example, where the exploitation of the peasantry and proletariat comes straight from the heart of darkness. Is it really adequate, or even helpful, to describe such a country any longer as an American colony? The horrors perpetrated there are not inflicted by overseers doing the work of their Yankee masters—as one might, for example, say about a plantation like Guatemala. Brazilian exploiters are home grown, and they are increasingly eager to put the once-proud Northern imperialists in their place. With their protectionist walls they shut out our exports, and then they take away, with their low-wage industries, our overseas markets in such fields as aviation and automobiles. To imply that such a country is being diddled by Washington, however true it may have been in the past, really does not get us very far today.

Neither, for that matter, do the three tiers. Is there not also a fourth tier—what economists call the NICs, the newly industrializing countries? In theory these countries, for example South Korea and Singapore, should be miserably poor and prone to revolution, as not so many years ago they were. But now they are nudging the second tier also-rans, and already they are giving first-tier nations (ours, for example) a run for their money. A theory of imperialism that fails to take these factors into account—that overlooks the whole phenomenon of that new cliché, the Pacific Rim—is more hortatory than descriptive.

We are not important to them?

IF MEAD IS a bit romantic about the Third World, however, he is coldly analytical in examining the effect of empire on the American republic. Here lies the book's greatest strength, and what makes it worthy of special attention. He is clever and intellectually penetrating on the various hypocrisies of liberalism and conservatism, fundamentalism and the worship of the marketplace, the imperial itch, the anesthetic platitudes of

our civic life, and the corruption of Republicanism into Caesarism. Like many radicals, he is as contemptuous of American liberalism, with its fetish of the marketplace and its shabby compromises with the need for social justice, as he is of conservatism. "A refusal to believe in real, irreconcilable class conflict is close to the essence of liberalism," he notes dismissively.

This does not mean, however, that he considers conservatism to be any better equipped to deal with the dilemma of an empire in decline. He sees American conservatives caught between the fundamentalist social wing of anti-abortionists, thought-controllers, and Bible-thumpers on one side, and simplistic market worshipers on the other. But the market, as he observes, is a radical, not a conservative, god, one that erodes traditional social institutions as it buries inefficient producers. The unacknowledged paradox of the right is that "conservative economics overthrows conservative order."

WHAT SOME CALL the Free World and what Mead calls the cold war empire is declining, in his analysis, not from lack of will, but from the inability of the economy to sustain it, and from the forces of opposition that it generates. While Third World insurrections are likely to spread—more Nicaraguas and Irans—declining domestic productivity, the loss of foreign markets, and mounting domestic demands for limited resources can only reduce the ability to intervene abroad. Sustained military intervention would weaken us politically and economically. Wall Street collapsed, after all, the same week that American ships blasted Iranian oil platforms in the Persian Gulf. Though the United States possesses awesome military power, the use of that power shakes the economic temple.

Ultimately, Mead argues, it will be economics, rather than the Soviets, that will make it impossible to sustain the remarkably successful but now deteriorating American empire. The steady shift of investment from high-wage to low-wage countries reduces demand on a global scale. This causes chronic overproduction, mounting unemployment, deterioration of the banking system, and political instability in the First World. There are signs that such conditions are emerging. Mead has his own solution to this crisis: increasing real wages in the Third World. And he concludes: "Only the active support of the powerful democratic

forces in the advanced countries can resolve the impasse in the Third World; only a resolution of the Third World's political problems can protect the social compromise in the advanced countries." Thus by doing good, the rich countries will also do well and save themselves.

NO
IF THIS historic compromise is not made, we can expect, he predicts, to be affected by the same class conflict endemic to the Third World. The economic surpluses that made it possible to satisfy the middle class and large portions of the working class will steadily diminish. The result will be a struggle to determine how society's resources shall be divided. "When politics visibly revolves around class, then theories of politics that begin with class look plausible." As unemployment and low wages seep from the Third World into the First, Mead foresees a resumption of social conflict that will present American democracy with one of its most serious challenges, as an embattled right, threatened by a revived populism on the left, flirts with authoritarianism.

Even if this scenario may seem far-fetched, Mead may not be amiss in arguing that the age of consensus politics, with liberals essentially indistinguishable from conservatives except on the far fringes, may be coming to an end. To him, this offers an opportunity to Democrats, if they turn from their neoliberal fantasies of techno-utopias and their indifference to the working class and recall that they have been successful at the polls only when they have been able to "synthesize the moral and economic yearnings of the people into a line of pragmatic policy."

What Mead taketh away with one hand he giveth with the other. Although class warfare may lie around the corner, as unemployment mounts and markets shrink, so too lies opportunity in the form of a postimperial America that will allow its own exploited under- and working classes not only to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, but to take the lead in creating a more equitable world.

Mead's approach may strike some as too '60s-ish, even though it is written in the mood and vocabulary of the '80s. His Savonarola-like judgments on the evils of American imperialism may seem not only déjà vu, but *vieux jeu*—a nostalgic look at the old days when the United States actually did, or at least seemed to, run the world. Others will see in his analysis an accurate description of the mentality evidenced in the Iran-contra

hearings. To my mind, his attack on empire is both justified and a bit outdated. Our various presidents and imperial administrators have inflicted suffering on innocent people in the name of noble causes. On the other hand, the notion that it was not only our right but our duty to run the world as we saw proper has evaporated with the trade surplus. Washington no longer defines the world, but is being defined by it. The arrogance may be undiminished, but the power is fast slipping.

Even if one cannot quite share Mead's indignation about the evils of our empire, his intensity of feeling gives this book a special thrust. His alternatives may strike some as too utopian or pessimistic; his economic "dependency" the-

ories too mechanistic; and his whole approach suspiciously literary. Yet these are the qualities that raise his work far above the predictability and the dreariness of most studies of political economy. One must be impressed by the range of his knowledge, the maturity of his understanding, and the passion of his conviction. The value of this book is not its lament about the inequities of the American empire, but in its understanding of the forces that empire has unleashed, and of the inescapable dilemmas its success has created. A study of culture and history as well as of economics, *Mortal Splendor* is that rarest of things, a work of political imagination.

RONALD STEEL

DOWN BY LAW

A Guide to Critical Legal Studies by Mark Kelman

(Harvard University Press, 365 pp., \$30)

One of the few remaining strongholds of the New Left has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be legal academia. Talk of social revolution thunders out of Harvard Law School, and radicals stalk the halls of Stanford and the University of Wisconsin. The Critical Legal Studies movement, or CLS, has given American legal education its liveliest moments of the last decade. The best stories come from Harvard: a CLS proposal that Harvard's janitors be paid as much as the law professors; student demonstrations and protests reminiscent of the '60s; a spectacular tenure fight, culminating in one professor's three-day sit-in in his own office. Despite recent setbacks at Harvard (one "crit" was denied tenure and president Derek Bok vetoed an offer to another), the crits have clearly become a major force in legal education.

For all the furor, however, the intellectual import of CLS has remained obscure. Finding a synthesis of CLS thought is no easy task, and Mark Kelman's book is an admirable attempt to remedy that lack. He offers an impressive survey of the major CLS writers and their relationship to other schools of legal thought. Although he considers himself a crit, he differs sharply from much

that his colleagues have written: he might have called his book "A Critical Guide to Critical Legal Studies." Again and again, he strips away hyperbolic rhetoric or fallacious reasoning and exposes what he considers the heart of the CLS position. The problem is that after Kelman's incisive criticism, we are left with an intriguing intellectual edifice, but one that seems to have lost much of its political significance.

Most of Kelman's efforts, like those of the CLS movement generally, have been aimed at attacking "liberal" theory. The intent has been to show that liberal thought is shot-through with inescapable philosophical contradictions, which render it ultimately incoherent. Rather than confronting these philosophical dilemmas, Kelman says, the legal system attempts to "paper over them." There is a curiously academic air to this criticism: "philosophical incoherence" is presented as the ultimate indictment of a social system. Unless society is going to stop in its tracks until philosophers produce definitive answers, however, society had better "paper over" these dilemmas. Exposing the way societies do this is interesting, but it is hardly a devastating social criticism.

21 Feb 88

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The unexamined enquiry

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